

Aquatic Park Bathhouse

Palace For The Public

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

San Francisco Maritime
National Historical Park



Introduction

Originally known as Black Point Cove, Aquatic Park has long been enjoyed by the citizens of San Francisco. Beginning as early as the 1860s, swimmers used the sandy beach and sheltered cove. Over the next 50 years, local recreation clubs, among them the Dolphin Club and South End Club, waged a successful campaign to rally public support to transform this area from a budding industrial zone into a waterfront park. The passage of a resolution by the city’s Board of Supervisors in 1914 marked a turning point in this long campaign. Black Point Cove was designated as the “site for the proposed aquatic park,” preserving it from future commercial development. Now this historic district supports recreational opportunities from rowing to swimming to just spending a lazy day with family and friends and, at its center, is the Aquatic Park Bathhouse.

Rebuilding America: Works Progress Administration (WPA)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA) was designed to create community in a time of crises – to regenerate both the public sites and the spirit of the American people. “We are definitely in an era of building,” Roosevelt said, “the best kind of building – the building of great public projects for the benefit of the public and with the definite objective of building human happiness.”

Tens of thousands of excited San Franciscans attended the dedication ceremony on January 22, 1939. The decades-old dream for Black Point Cove had been achieved, and WPA officials proclaimed, “Here thousands of happy youngsters find protected play-ground in the water and on the shore. Here thousands of wearied adults may sink into warm, embracing sand, content to just lie and relax, and revel in the beauties spread before them.”



This WPA photo, taken in 1938, shows the bleachers and promenade beginning to take shape. P88-035.122p

The dream to create an Aquatic Park had been conceived many decades earlier. The acceptance of a proposal submitted to the WPA in 1935 resulted in the dream finally became reality. From 1936-1939, the WPA constructed the Aquatic Park Bathhouse, meant to be a “Palace for the Public.” For its time, the Bathhouse represented the pinnacle of modernity. It contained an emergency hospital, restaurant, concession stand, skylights, showers activated by photoelectric “eyes,” and lockers and dressing rooms that could accommodate hundreds of swimmers. The adjacent bleachers provided seating for thousands to enjoy the waterfront park. A beautiful promenade followed the curve of the sandy beach along the water’s edge.



A view of the front of the Bathhouse under construction, September 28, 1937. P88-035.86p



The art and architecture of Aquatic Park



WPA artists working on the lobby murals in 1938.

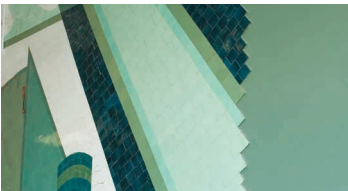
Creating Aquatic Park was a cooperative effort. William Mooser II, a member of a distinguished family of San Francisco architects, was the project supervisor for the \$1.5 million architectural extravaganza. His son, William Mooser III, designed the Bathhouse and other structures in the park. His design was in the streamline moderne style, with sweeping lines, curved facades of sheer, white walls, stainless steel railings, and porthole windows.

The artists who decorated the Bathhouse interior chose to avoid the grim realities of the day.

Through paint, tile, and sculpture, they created an escape into a fantastic, nautical world. Hilaire Hiler, the project’s art director, created the brightly colored murals on the lobby walls, depicting the mythic continents of Atlantis and Mu.

Sargent Claude Johnson, an African American artist, carved the stone facade that adorns the main entrance. He also created the tile mosaic on the veranda. Sailboats and smiling fish convey a harmonious sense of freedom. Sculptor Beniamino Bufano created fanciful statues of animals, carved from granite and black marble.

Controversy on the waterfront: The palace for the public opens... and closes



The unfinished section of Sargent Johnson’s tile mosaic.

With great fanfare and much acclaim, the Aquatic Park Bathhouse opened for the public on January 22, 1939, but the euphoria would not last.

The city had decided to lease most of the Bathhouse to private businessmen, who promptly opened the Aquatic Park Casino. This exclusive restaurant and nightclub discouraged public use of the building. When a group of school boys brought their sack lunches to the veranda, they were ordered to leave by the concessioner. Prominent signs read, “Private – Keep Out.”

The public outcry was intense, and the outraged artists stormed City Hall. Sargent Johnson walked away from the project. His beautiful tile mosaic on the veranda remains unfinished. Bufano moved his statues to the beach stating, “I would rather have kids playing over my statues than to have drunks stumbling over them. And I’m no teetotaler, either.”

An investigation soon followed, and the city was found guilty of mismanagement. The concessioner was ousted, and the doors padlocked. The building was open again during 1941, when an exhibit of historic ship models was on display.

The years 1942-1948

World War II

After sitting idle for months, the future of Aquatic Park and its Bathhouse looked bleak. With the increasing involvement of the United States in WWII, the city leased Aquatic Park to the U.S. Army.

Troops from the 216th Coast Artillery were quartered in the building. Later, the headquarters of the Fourth Anti-Aircraft Command, responsible for the defense of the Pacific Coast, was established there. After the war ended in 1945, the military transferred the property back to the city.

San Francisco Senior Center

Shortly after the city resumed control of the building in 1948, the San Francisco Senior Center leased the ground floor of the Aquatic Park Bathhouse building. This is the oldest, private, non-profit Senior Center in the United States. Today, the Senior Center offers classes and other activities to over 2,000 seniors each year.



A museum is born

Karl Kortum, a man with an abiding love of ships and the sea, had the inspired idea of transforming the upper floors of the vacant Aquatic Park Bathhouse into a maritime museum. The Bathhouse became a public building once again when the Maritime Mu-

seum opened in 1951. The Maritime Museum, showcasing San Francisco’s maritime past, was a great success.

A National Park



A model of the *Kenilworth*, one of the ship models displayed in the Museum lobby. Built and launched in 1887, this vessel is similar to the square rigged *Balclutha*, part of the park’s collection of historic vessels.

Today, Aquatic Park and the Maritime Museum are part of the San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park.

In 2006, the Museum was closed so work could begin on a multi-year rehabilitation of the building and adjacent bleachers. The new stainless-steel windows and doors now gleam, and the new, shiny red-colored roof is keeping out all the damaging moisture. The colors and forms of the restored lobby murals painted by Hiler vibrate with a new intensity. The building is once again open to the public, beginning yet another chapter in the history of the “Palace for the Public.” While planning for new exhibits continues, the park has installed

several ship models, paintings, and dioramas in the Museum lobby.

The dream of so many people for Aquatic Park continues to unfold, and the Bathhouse remains as a symbol of continuous change.

